Learning a foreign language: five most common mistakes

Learning a new foreign language is never easy – but it's a lot harder if you fall into these five common traps, says Anne Merritt.



Language learning: learning a new language, let alone a new alphabet, is tricky - could a universal phonetic script be the answer? Photo: Blue Jeans Images / Alamy

http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02418/Anne_Merritt_2418799j.jpg

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It’s a myth that intelligent people are better at learning languages.

Sure, it doesn’t hurt, especially when innately academic types hold an arsenal of learning strategies. Most language learning skills, however, are in fact habits, which can be formed through a bit of discipline and self-awareness.

* [**>> Ten easiest languages for native English speakers to learn**](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationpicturegalleries/9722196/Easiest-foreign-languages-in-pictures.html)

Here are the five most common mistakes language learners make – and how to correct them...

**Not listening enough**

There’s a school of linguistics that believes language learning begins with a “silent period”. Just as babies learn to produce language by hearing and parroting sounds, language learners need to practise listening in order to learn. This can reinforce learned vocabulary and structures, and help learners see patterns in language.

* [**'Text-speak' isn't evolution - it's laziness**](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/9966117/Text-speak-language-evolution-or-just-laziness.html) Listening is the communicative skill we use most in daily life, yet it can be difficult to practice unless you live in a foreign country or attend immersive language classes. The solution? Find music, podcasts, TV shows and movies in the target language, and listen, listen, listen, as often as possible.

**Lack of curiosity**

In language learning, attitude can be a key factor in how a student progresses.

Linguists studied attitude in language learning in the 1970s in Quebec, Canada, when tension was high between Anglo- and Francophones. The study found that Anglophones holding prejudices against French Canadians often did poorly in French language learning, even after studying French for years as a mandatory school subject.

On the other hand, a learner who is keen about the target culture will be more successful in their language studies. The culturally curious students will be more receptive to the language and more open to forming relationships with native speakers.

**Rigid thinking**

Linguists have found that students with a low tolerance of ambiguity tend to struggle with language learning.

Language learning involves a lot of uncertainty – students will encounter new vocabulary daily, and for each grammar rule there will be a dialectic exception or irregular verb. Until native-like fluency is achieved, there will always be some level of ambiguity.

The type of learner who sees a new word and reaches for the dictionary instead of guessing the meaning from the context may feel stressed and disoriented in an immersion class. Ultimately, they might quit their language studies out of sheer frustration. It’s a difficult mindset to break, but small exercises can help. Find a song or text in the target language and practice figuring out the gist, even if a few words are unknown.

**A single method**

Some learners are most comfortable with the listen-and-repeat drills of a language lab or podcast. Some need a grammar textbook to make sense of a foreign tongue. Each of these approaches is fine, but it’s a mistake to rely on only one.

Language learners who use multiple methods get to practise different skills and see concepts explained in different ways. What’s more, the variety can keep them from getting stuck in a learning rut.

When choosing a class, learners should seek a course that practises the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). For self-study, try a combination of textbooks, audio lessons, and language learning apps.

**Fear**

It doesn’t matter how well a person can write in foreign script, conjugate a verb, or finish a vocabulary test. To learn, improve, and truly use your target language, we need to speak.

This is the stage when language students can clam up, and feelings of shyness or insecurity hinder all their hard work. In Eastern cultures where saving face is a strong social value, EFL teachers often complain that students, despite years of studying English, simply will not speak it. They’re too afraid of bungling the grammar or mispronouncing words in a way that would embarrass them.

The key is that those mistakes help language learners by showing them the limits of language, and correcting errors before they become ingrained. The more learners speak, the quicker they improve.